



# **The Attorney Hiring Zone:**

## **Top Activities to Win New Clients**

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*Prepared by*  
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## Top Activities to Increase Your Chances of Winning New Clients

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# The Attorney Hiring Zone: Top Activities to Increase Your Chances of Winning New Clients

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## Introduction

We are rapidly entering a new dawn in the law firm landscape. Corporate counsel are managing greater risk with smaller staffs and smaller budgets. Competition is intense. BTI research shows that in 2009 both large and small corporate clients have narrowed the number of law firms on their rosters. Fortune 1000 clients, for instance, have dropped an average of 10 law firms from their rosters and are now using an average of 45 firms—down 18% from 2008's average of 55.

Although they are fully occupied managing risk with fewer resources, corporate counsel also report being swarmed by attorneys practicing subtle, and not-so-subtle, sales activities. Many of these efforts consist of an avalanche of sales calls too vast to filter, and other activities that consume substantial law firm resources for negligible returns.

## The BTI Study

Against this backdrop, BTI undertook a five-month-long study to identify the business development activities that best allow attorneys to break through the clutter to positively differentiate themselves and receive real hiring consideration.

The findings presented here are based on 270 in-depth, one-on-one interviews with top legal executives at large corporations. Participating legal executives scored the effectiveness of various business development activities on a numerical scale, and also responded to extensive probes about the actual act of hiring an attorney.

For this study, BTI interviewed legal personnel at 28% of the Fortune 1000 and 15% of the Global 500. The corporations involved had average annual revenue of \$25.7 billion and spanned more than 15 industries, including healthcare, energy, banking, financial services, manufacturing, and technology.



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## Summary of Findings

- A peer referral is the most direct route to hiring consideration. Fully 57% of corporate counsel will consider hiring a new attorney based on a single peer referral. BTI research shows that superior client service (and achieving a reputation for it) drives referrals.
- “Credentialing” activities are second only to peer referrals and scheduled in-person meetings in their effectiveness in moving lawyers into the hiring zone, and are nearly twice as effective as advertising. Corporate counsel find an attorney’s participation in these credentialing activities (defined within as being quoted by the media and other market authorities, speaking at small seminars, and authoring articles in trade publications) as credible indicators of an attorney’s potential to be a valuable advisor. The fact that a trusted third party has “screened” or “vetted” the attorney’s qualifications in each of the credentialing activities is, in large part, what makes them legitimate indicators of value to corporate counsel.
- “Credentialing” activities—unlike lower-scoring “awareness” activities—enjoy a “cumulative effect”: being quoted several times in the media, for instance, has a greater positive effect on corporate counsel than being quoted once. Further, credentialing activities generate content easily shared directly with corporate counsel to back up a referral or establish the credibility of lawyers on sales calls, and more broadly with the general market through today’s numerous information channels (social networks, attorney website biographies, etc.). This easy distribution and networking of credible information makes credentialing activities’ “cumulative effect” relatively easy to realize.
- BTI research showed that with the “cumulative effect,” an attorney quoted three times in the media can achieve nearly the same trust factor from the quotes as they would from a single peer referral.
- Appearances at large events, feature profile articles, advertising, and casual in-person meetings have the least effect on moving lawyers into the hiring zone. None of these awareness activities imply an endorsement from a third party. Further, the activities in this third group require great expense to repeat and do not have a comparable “cumulative effect.”



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## The Key Business Development Activities

Type	Activity	Rank	Score
I. Personal Knowledge Activities	Referral from a Peer	1	7.5
	In-Person Scheduled Introductory Meeting	2	6.1
II. Credentialing Activities	Quoted as an Expert by the Media	3	5.5
	Presenting at a Small Education Seminar	4	5.4
	Practicing at a Well-Regarded Firm	5	5.3
	Authoring an Article in the Trade Press	6	5.1
III. Awareness Activities	Speaking at a Prominent Event	7	4.8
	Featured Subject in an Article	8	4.1
	Advertising	9	3.4
	In-Person Casual Meeting	10	3.3

Note: Score based on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is the least effective and 10 is the most effective in differentiating attorneys.

### I. Personal Knowledge Activities

BTI's study asked corporate counsel to rate the 10 major attorney business development activities on their effectiveness in distinguishing an attorney in a positive way, based upon their impact on consideration for hire. On a ten-point scale, two activities had an average score higher than a six:

- (1) a referral from a peer; and
- (2) an in-person scheduled meeting.

In these cases the lawyer receiving consideration has been vetted at a personal level, either by the hiring attorney or a colleague.

#### Referral from a Peer

BTI's research shows the influence of a single peer referral is powerful enough to catapult an attorney directly into a potential client's hiring zone. 57% of corporate counsel report they will consider hiring an attorney based on a single peer referral.



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Two factors make peer referrals particularly powerful. First, when recommending an attorney to corporate counsel, the party doing so puts her reputation at stake. A willingness to do so is the strongest indicator of the recommender's belief in the referred attorney.

Second, peer referrals often come from those who enjoy first-hand experience with the referred attorney. BTI's research reveals superior client service drives peer referrals.

### **In-Person Scheduled Introductory Meeting**

Attorneys who take the effort to schedule an in-person introductory meeting (i.e., sales call) with a potential client—the second most-highly rated activity—also differentiate themselves from the pack in the eyes of corporate counsel. The in-person introductory meeting provides the opportunity to understand prospective client needs, communicate the value an attorney brings, and to demonstrate an ability to solve client problems.

Those who get in the door for an in-person meeting, of course, have been subject to the corporate counsel's own screening process, which is intense and difficult. For instance, BTI's research reveals that attorneys will have reached out up to seven times with corporate counsel in order to secure a single meeting, and most corporate counsel report routinely declining initial requests for meetings as a filter to test for follow-up activity. Interestingly, they report that approximately 90% of attorneys do not try a second time. Those attorneys who do persevere must navigate a difficult road between demonstrating their qualifications and becoming a pest.

Once attorneys obtain a scheduled in-person meeting, they can distinguish themselves by sharing third party evidence of their value through, for instance, client testimonials, reprints of articles in which they were quoted or referenced, reprints of bylined articles they authored for respected trade publications, Q&As, etc.

It is important not to overstate the benefit of a personal screening from the corporate counsel: in-person introductory meetings (rated a 6.1) are considered less valuable than peer referrals (7.5), in which the screening function has been performed by known and trusted third parties. In fact, in-person introductory meetings are considered just slightly more valuable than the activities discussed in the following section, in which potential hires have been screened by sources in positions of trust but are not necessarily known personally to the corporate counsel.



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## II. Credentialing Activities

The activities in this second grouping, with scores clustered between 5.1 and 5.5, all sit within one point of a scheduled, in-person introductory meeting.

Each of these activities conveys an implicit endorsement from a third party trusted within the profession generally, or by the prospect specifically (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal* or a blogger they respect). As with the personal knowledge activities discussed above, with credentialing activities an attorney's credibility is enhanced through the vetting by an outside party.

Furthermore, as discussed in more detail below, the credentialing activities (with the exception of practicing at a well-regarded firm), also have the power of a "cumulative effect," significantly increasing their hiring zone impact.

### Quoted as an Expert by the Media

Attorneys quoted in respected publications<sup>1</sup> get noticed by corporate counsel. Clients perceive reputable media outlets as being capable of identifying attorneys with the greatest expertise (i.e., possessing knowledge and delivering value) in the fields on which they are reporting. Because corporate counsel trust this screening performed by reporters, they value its ability to highlight attorneys they may not know but are worth seeking out.

Attorneys quoted in the media, of course, positively differentiate themselves further through the content of their remarks. Offering insightful commentary on issues of impact to a particular corporate legal department increases the power of a media appearance.

Media quotations have marketing value well beyond their initial publication or broadcast. In the electronic age, image-enhancing media appearances can be distributed easily, and with virtually no expense, to specific prospects and the greater market through nearly endless channels: websites, blogs, and social networks like LinkedIn, Legal OnRamp and Twitter, to name a few.

Corporate counsel report being even more positively influenced by an attorney's media quotes when the quotes are transmitted to them from a peer. In such cases, the credentialing effect of the media appearance is amplified by the peer's recognition and promotion of it, lending it the "colleague-approved" impact similar to referrals.

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<sup>1</sup> *Corporate Counsel* and *The Wall Street Journal* are the two top-rated publications read by corporate counsel according to BTI research



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### **Presenting at a Small Education Seminar**

A vast majority of corporate counsel attends industry and law firm-sponsored events. Opportunities to speak as an authority at an educational meeting—when taken advantage of in the right way—can be a powerful factor in distinguishing an attorney from his or her peers.

The success of the appearance as a business development tool depends on the attorney's presentation—and the extent to which it captures the attention of corporate counsel. The environment for doing so is ideal: seminar appearances allow the attorney to address multiple corporate counsel in an intimate, business-oriented environment. As in scheduled introductory meetings, attorneys have a rare opportunity to show themselves “in action” before their potential clients.

Corporate counsel tell us that while they attend many seminars, few offer instruction that is truly new or important to their businesses. By creating insightful presentations on emerging topics of relevance, attorneys can stand out to an audience of corporate counsel in the same manner as do those who secure individual, in-person meetings. BTI's research suggests speakers are well served to dig deep for anecdotes or use onsite polling to identify meaty issues facing prospective clients.

### **Practicing at a Well-Regarded Firm**

A law firm's collective reputation and prestige is a reflection of the successes and reputations its individual partners achieve over time. Corporate counsel report that they frequently impute the reputation and prestige of a law firm onto its individual attorneys. When that reputation is good, it represents a significant credential in the attorney's favor.

Practicing at a regarded firm alone, however, does not place an attorney within the hiring zone. Corporate counsel act only if they have formed their own positive opinion about the quality of a firm and the individual attorney seeking their business. Thus, while attorneys at the most highly respected firms will have a “plus factor,” the question largely collapses back to that of whether an individual attorney has successfully distinguished himself from the competition through other means.

That is not to say that a firm's reputation cannot be decisive. BTI's research suggests that for firms that are unknown or saddled with poor reputations, their attorneys will almost certainly not receive serious consideration. In the end, practicing at a well-respected firm is most accurately described as a necessary but not sufficient condition for hire by large corporate clients.





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### Authoring an Article in the Trade Press

Attorneys who publish articles and Q&As in respected trade publications are perceived by corporate counsel as having extensive knowledge on a specific subject. As with attorneys quoted in the media, those whose articles have been chosen for publication by reputable outlets have achieved, in the eyes of corporate counsel, a reliable indication of their expertise.

The category of “authoring an article for the trade press” sits at the lower end of the second grouping due to the existence of less respectable publishers’ “pay-for-play” practices. Corporate counsel receive more than a few publications that will print articles from attorneys in exchange for payment and these paid articles have a diluting effect on the group, as few corporate counsel have the time or inclination to separate the credible articles from the others.

For attorneys published by the most well-respected publishers<sup>2</sup>, however, the integrity of the screening process is unquestioned and this credential retains significant value.

### The Cumulative Effect

BTI’s research reveals that the activities in the above group, with the exception of practicing at a well-regarded firm, have a powerful cumulative effect. That is, repeating these activities strengthens their credentialing force and moves the attorney closer to the hiring zone. For example, BTI’s research shows that the impact on corporate counsel of being quoted as an expert three or more times approaches the credentialing power of a single peer referral.

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<sup>2</sup> *Corporate Counsel* and *The Wall Street Journal* are the two top-rated publications read by corporate counsel according to BTI research



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### **III. Awareness Activities**

This final group of activities received scores ranging from 3.3 to 4.8. No activity falling within this group includes a screening function considered reliable by corporate counsel. These activities therefore do not serve as credentials, nor do they benefit from the “cumulative effect” that occurs with the credentialing activities described above. These activities can raise general awareness of a law firm or individual attorney, but do not, in and of themselves, push attorneys into the hiring zone.

#### **Speaking at a Prominent Event**

Like presenting at small, educational meetings, speaking at prominent events enables attorneys to prove their expertise to corporate counsel. Yet, there is a clear difference. Smaller meetings are well-suited to tailored, in-depth discussions. Larger, more prominent events do not foster substantive exchanges, and they require attorneys to present content that appeals to a broad audience. Moreover, the “pay-for-play” requirements of some industry events further diminishes their value as a reliable filter for corporate counsel. Thus, despite increasing an attorney’s visibility, speaking at a prominent event has relatively little impact on moving attorneys towards the hiring zone.

#### **Featured Subject in an Article**

Feature articles are typically in-depth treatments of a single individual that may or may not be valuable to readers in any significant way. While such articles can result in extended, flattering portrayals of a lawyer or firm, and often garner increased media attention leading to more quotes and other opportunities, features have minimal effectiveness—on their own—in moving an attorney into the hiring zone.

Interestingly, BTI’s research shows corporate counsel express a lack of understanding about the journalistic screening process that goes into the selection of subjects for feature articles, and this uncertainty results in their regarding feature articles as a less-than-reliable indication of an attorney’s expertise.



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### **Advertising**

Although advertising is effective in building awareness of a firm, and while advertised messages benefit from repetition, advertisements are not screened and thus carry no imprimatur of approval by a third party. Thus, ad frequency does not have the credentialing power of repeated trusted endorsements, which occur with the first and second groups of activities.

### **In-Person Casual Meeting**

On the list of top business development activities, in-person casual meetings between attorneys and potential clients—most likely to occur at industry events and social functions—scored the lowest rating (3.3). While useful as a tool to parlay into a scheduled introductory meeting and other opportunities, on their own, in-person casual meetings do nothing to demonstrate an attorney's qualifications. Casual meetings occur at the very beginning of the process and are beneficial only in retrospect, after the attorney has proven his or her worthiness for consideration through other means.



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### Conclusion

BTI's study shows a wide disparity in effectiveness between the activities with the greatest impact for entering a potential client's hiring zone, and those with the least. The top activity with the most impact is peer referrals, followed by in-person scheduled introductory meetings.

While highly valued, these activities cannot form the sole basis of a business development plan. Credentialing activities—being quoted as an expert in the media, speaking at small educational seminars, practicing at a well-regarded firm, and authoring articles and texts in the trade press—approach the positive impact of a scheduled in-person introductory meeting while also bringing additional advantages. With the exception of practicing at a well-regarded firm, each activity is capable of generating content that can be easily and inexpensively distributed to a vast audience and packaged for use again and again to prospective clients. Also, these activities have a cumulative effect, through which the strength of the implied endorsement behind them increases with multiple instances.

The final group of activities can build awareness of a firm or individual attorney, but does not carry with it any reliable endorsement. Thus, the more generalized awareness built by these activities—as opposed to the more particularized awareness raised by a referral or credentialing activity—is not the type that corporate counsel consider significant in hiring decisions.



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## BTI Approach & Methodology

Our primary goal was to define the activities and tactics individual attorneys can employ in order to positively distinguish themselves from other attorneys and become considered for hire by potential clients. The research focuses on the relative impact of these activities on the hiring decisions of corporate counsel.

Overall, we were working towards three overriding objectives. These include:

1. Identify the key activities which differentiate attorneys in the eyes of corporate counsel
2. Delineate the relative impact of the key activities on the hiring decisions of corporate counsel
3. Understand the cumulative effect of the key activities on the hiring considerations of corporate counsel

BTI conducted over 270 individual in-depth interviews between May 2008 and May 2009 with top legal executives at large and Fortune 1000 companies:

- 28% of the Fortune 100
- 15% of the Global 500
- Revenue of \$1 billion+
  - Average revenue of \$25.7 billion
  - Median revenue of \$5.2 billion

Interviews spanned more than 15 industries, including banking, high tech, energy, manufacturing, retail, health care, and financial services.



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#### The BTI Consulting Group

The BTI Consulting Group (BTI) is the leading provider of strategic market research to law firms and professional services firms. BTI ([www.bticonsulting.com](http://www.bticonsulting.com)) performs more market research about law firms than virtually anyone. We conduct the only continuous benchmarking market study in the legal services industry based on more than 2,500 independent interviews with corporate counsel and key decision makers that hire law firms.

BTI enjoys a far-reaching client base that includes:

- More than 70 of the 100 largest law firms
- Over 250 of the leading professional services firms worldwide
- Over 35% of the Global 500 corporations
- More than 450 Fortune 1000 companies
- Law firms with 6 to 600 partners

BTI is also the undisputed leader in providing customized client surveys to law firms. BTI has helped more than 150 law firms and professional services firms improve client service through compelling research and advice.

#### Hellerman Baretz Communications LLC

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Hellerman Baretz Communications' press release with thoughts on this report from John Hellerman is located online at [www.hellermanbaretz.com/Files/BTIresearch.pdf](http://www.hellermanbaretz.com/Files/BTIresearch.pdf).



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### **Questions, thoughts and comments?**

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